



# MEAT-FREE MUNCHIES

POPULAR, MOUTHWATERING  
VEGETARIAN SNACKS IN INDONESIA.

WORDS & PHOTOS JUSTINE LOPEZ



Indonesia is not known for being the most vegetarian-friendly country. After all, most of the nation's popular dishes – *soto ayam*, *rendang* and *bakso*, to name a few – are all meat-centric. However, it is nothing if not a nation of diversity, including when it comes to culinary choices.

Contrary to popular belief, vegetarians in Indonesia aren't just limited to eating *nasi goreng kampung* (village-style fried rice). These vegetarian delights can be found most everywhere, from street vendors to 5-star restaurants. They are not only meat-free but they are so delicious they can be enjoyed by everyone, vegetarian or not.

#### BAKWAN JAGUNG

These are not your run-of-the-mill corn fritters. They often have slivers of carrots and cabbage inside and are spiced with fingerroot and kafir lime leaves. This is one of the more popular vegetarian snacks in Indonesia; they are all over the place and are widely available at food stalls across the country. Depending on the region, they are also referred

to as *dadar jagung* and *perkedel jagung*. Vegetarians make sure to avoid *bakwan undang* (shrimp fritters).

#### SAYUR ASEM

It seems as though this clear soup is served at every restaurant, whether it's in a fancy mall in Jakarta or on a street corner in Bali. What's great about *sayur asem* is that it's made with a tamarind-based broth and it is rarely prepared with any animal-based ingredients. It is the tamarind that gives this soup its signature sour flavor. *Sayur asem* is often prepared with young jackfruit, green beans and corn on the cob and makes for a delicious and healthy vegetarian meal.

#### GADO-GADO

This widespread Indonesian dish is the go-to food for vegetarians in Indonesia. It is made up of cooked veggies – usually carrots, green beans, cabbage and gourd – tempeh, tofu and a hardboiled egg. All of this is drenched in a creamy and spicy peanut sauce and the result is heavenly. Not to mention it is packed with protein, an added bonus for vegetarians. Note that *gado-gado* is usually served with *krupuk* (crackers), which are often flavored with prawn.

**TEMPEH**

Vegetarians rejoice that tempeh plays such a large role in Indonesian cuisine. Tempeh originated in Java and is today eaten throughout the archipelago. It is fried up and sold by street vendors as a snack and it is also featured in many Indonesian dishes. The nice thing about local buffets and food stalls is that there are bound to be numerous tempeh dishes. Sometimes there might be meat or fish sauce mixed in to them, but it's easy enough to find pure vegetarian and vegan options.

**TAHU BERONTAK**

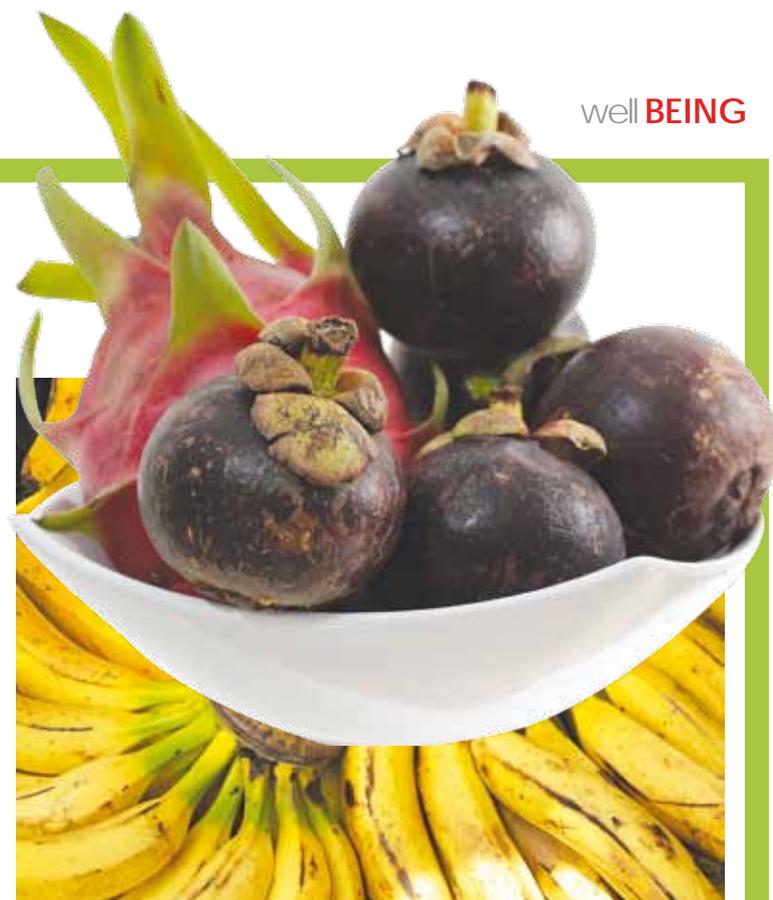
Like tempeh, *tahu* (tofu) is cooked up everywhere in Indonesia. *Tahu berontak* is a really popular snack and it's incredibly addictive. Street vendors stuff huge hunks of tofu with anything from cabbage to carrots to bean sprouts and deep fry them until they're deliciously crunchy. This dish is often served with a sweet and spicy sauce made from *kecap manis* and sambal.

**CENDOL**

Similar super-sweet desserts are found in a few countries around Southeast Asia, but this one is particularly popular in Indonesia. It is concocted from coconut milk, a palm sugar syrup and topped with green pieces of jelly made from pandan and rice flour. This dessert can be found in both modest eateries and lavish restaurant across the country. It doesn't matter where you buy it; it is always divine and is a quintessentially Indonesian dessert.

**GRILLED CORN WITH SAMBAL**

Freshly grilled corn is always good, especially when it's slathered with seasoned butter and spicy sambal. Sambal is a spicy sauce concocted from chili peppers, ginger, garlic, shallots and more. Vegetarians traveling in Indonesia need to be careful that the sambal isn't made with shrimp or fish paste. The good news is that there are many types of sambal – such as sambal Bu Rudy – that are purely vegetarian.



# VEGGIE TALES

I SUPPOSE you can say that I was a picky eater as a child – at least that's what my mom says. Come dinner time I would stubbornly refuse to eat much of the food my mother would serve me. Things like chicken drumsticks and sausage grossed me out. Unlike most American children who despise vegetables, I much preferred to eat my greens over my meats.

As I got older my eating habits didn't change much. And when I decided to stop eating meat completely at the age of 17, it came as no surprise to my mom. It was a long time coming, she said. However, it wasn't just my dislike of meat that spurred my decision; it was a myriad of things actually. The environmental and health benefits intrigued me, as did being an advocate for animal rights.

I have always been an animal lover and grew up in a house filled with pets – cats, birds and a dog. In high school I worked part time in a pet store, caring for animals from kittens to lizards to fish. My love of animals ran deep and I couldn't help but question why I was eating meat when I could easily and healthily substitute it with protein-packed alternatives.

The more I thought about it, the harder it became for me to enjoy the foods – like McDonald's hamburgers and my grandma's meatloaf – I had once relished.

So one day I just stopped eating meat. I cut out all meats, including poultry, beef, pork and fish. And you know what? It wasn't hard, at all.

Sixteen years later and I'm still meat-free. I am what



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meats or fish and I try my best not to consume certain things that have animal products in them, like chicken broth and fish sauce.

**HEALTH FACTORS**

When I tell people that I'm a vegetarian they almost always assume that I'm a health nut. As much as I don't want to admit this, that's not true. Contrary to popular belief being a vegetarian doesn't automatically mean that you're healthy.

Vegetarians are perfectly capable of eating junk food day in and day out. Many vegetarians also tend to

you call a lactovegetarian, meaning I do eat dairy (cheese, eggs, milk, etc.), which is how I get a large part of my protein. I don't eat any

substitute protein with carbohydrates, which can lead to rapid weight gain. A mistake that personally led me to gain 10 pounds when I was 18.

Now that I've been a vegetarian for 16 years, I've educated myself on the ins and outs of being healthy, of supplementing meat with healthy proteins like nuts, soy products, leafy greens and lentils. I make a concerted effort to eat plenty of vitamin rich fruits and vegetables. I also try my best to limit my carb intake, but as someone who loves bread and pasta this is a constant battle!

While being a vegetarian doesn't automatically make you healthy, if you do it right there are a plethora of health benefits, from lowering cholesterol to reducing the risk of certain cancers to losing weight. But committing to a vegetarian diet isn't for everyone. It was just a personal decision I made as a teen that somehow stuck. Sometimes it can be challenging to dine out with friends. But, most of the time I'm grateful that I'm a vegetarian, because I'm never tempted to eat fattening fast foods.

Whenever I tell people that I'm a vegetarian, they almost always say, "I could never do that. Don't you miss meat?" They look at me quizzically when I answer, "No, I don't miss it at all." When I made the decision to become a vegetarian at 17, I never looked back. And with so many delicious foods out there being a vegetarian isn't hard and it never gets boring; there are plenty of tasty options to keep me satisfied for a lifetime. +Mary K. Higgins

